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STATE FOR IO/UNESCO KELLY SIEKMAN, KEVIN PILZ, AMY OSTERMEIER, OES
BARRIE RIPIN, OES/STAS ANDREW W. REYNOLDS
STATE FOR NSC GENE WHITNEY
STATE FOR NSF INTERNATIONAL OFFICE ROSE GOMBAY

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: UNESCO: DAKAR OFFICE CHIEF OUTLINES DECENTRALIZATION
CHALLENGES

1. Summary and Comment: To explore issues relating to decentralization, Ambassador Oliver and Science Officer met with Lalla Aicha Ben Barka, Director of the UNESCO Office in Dakar and the regional office for Education in Africa (BREDa). Although the UNESCO secretariat often highlights its decentralization efforts, Ben Barka described a challenging situation, including limited resources and lack of strategic coordination from headquarters. Ben Barka explained that a key challenge has been identifying a niche for the office, particularly with respect to other UN agencies and aid bodies. She is pursuing a role for the office as a purveyor of information, for example in advancing education goals via sector analysis. Another potential niche for UNESCO in Africa might be in providing information on methods of civic education, Ben Barka noted enthusiastically.

2. As this conversation highlights, the panel reviewing UNESCO's Natural and Social Sciences sectors should examine carefully the issue of decentralization. The Dakar office serves as the regional office for education. But its staff also includes a science officer -- reporting also to the regional science office in Nairobi -- who has a limited program budget (80,000 USD over two years). Given the lack of strategic direction from headquarters, it is perhaps no surprise that many complain that UNESCO programs, including in the area of hydrology, have limited impact in Africa. End Summary.

A Key Challenge: Strategic Coordination from Headquarters

3. Ambassador Oliver opened by querying Ben Barka on challenges facing the Dakar office. Ben Barka explained that the office has limited means. As a regional office for education, it is meant to provide technical assistance to 46 sub-Saharan countries. In addition, it serves as a cluster office for 7 countries in West Africa promoting activities across the range of UNESCO's mandate. In principle, the office is meant to have eight officers, four working on regional educational issues (two of those posts are vacant), four in the cluster function in the areas of culture, natural sciences, social sciences and communications. (Note: According to the Dakar office website, it is the largest UNESCO office in Africa. End Note.)

4. One related issue is that of the profile and distribution of UNESCO's presence in the field, i.e. cluster offices versus national offices. Ben Barka explained that national offices were meant to enhance the visibility of UNESCO in the field, particularly with regard to other UN agencies, but they have not reached a size that allows them to have much impact. That said, national offices could play a role in post-conflict situations, Ben Barka noted. In addition, the national offices need enhanced support from the regional offices; regional offices should build a "roster of expertise" and work with headquarters and UNESCO institutes to address needs identified on the national level.

5. Then there is the question of the Dakar office's mission. Ben Barka described lack of communication with headquarters as "a major problem." Action requests from headquarters arrive with no context, and often at the last minute; in addition, two or three departments sometimes ask for the same thing. She noted that ADG for Education Peter Smith is working with a consultant to ameliorate the problem of communication between headquarters and the field, including UNESCO's education institutes. On strategic planning, Ben Barka described consultative regional meetings meant to inform UNESCO's medium-term strategy as inefficient. Although field offices are represented at the meetings, they do not really contribute substantively to the process. Field offices should be involved in advance, contributing quantitative and qualitative information on in-country conditions before the meeting. (The regional meeting for Africa on the Medium-Term strategy will take place in Rwanda in June).

Carving out a Role for UNESCO in Sector Analysis...

6. Ambassador Oliver queried Ben Barka on the coherence and impact of the office's work, given that it is meant to implement 130 activities. Ben Barka stressed the need to clarify the niche of the office. Given limited human and financial resources available, it

would make most sense for the office to serve as a producer and purveyor of knowledge, including to other UN agencies, rather than as an implementer of programs. Ben Barka reported that her predecessor had begun to carve out a niche for the office in this area. Thanks to the French aid agency, young statisticians, planners and economists were seconded to the office to do a sector analysis report on Dakar plus five goals (on education). One goal of the analysis was to help the four sub-Saharan LIFE ("Literacy Initiative for Empowerment") countries formulate, implement and assess the impact of their national policies. In general, sector analyses of needs are key to building in-country capacity. Other initiatives informed by this type of sector analysis include AIDS education and Education for All (EFA).

17. Of course, sector analysis is not enough; it is important that the resulting information be disseminated, for example via regional workshops involving civil society, or meetings with parliamentarians in advance of national budget votes. Ben Barka noted that the Dakar office had launched a forum for parliamentarians to train lawmakers on education issues. In June 2005, the Dakar Office organized a conference on Education for All meant to track progress and analyze obstacles faced by national education systems in meeting EFA goals.

18. Ben Barka observed that neither UNICEF nor the World Bank is involved in this type of work - doing upstream analysis and working with national governments to enhance their own analytical capacity. To promote education in Africa, UNESCO should focus on production of knowledge to put at the disposal of the World Bank, UNICEF, bilateral aid missions and national governments.

.... and Civic Education in Africa

19. In addition to sector analysis, Ben Barka saw another possible niche for the Dakar office in providing guidance to national governments in the field of civic education programs. This would include good governance, the electoral process and democratic decision-making. 45 years after independence, this is imperative for continued African progress in establishing sound government services and systems. How can national educational systems be used to build transparent societies? This also touches on issues relating to identity and language, Ben Barka noted.

Oliver